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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: IRAQI ELECTION CAMPAIGN WEEK TWO: POLITICAL ROUNDUP

REF: A. BAGHDAD 475
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 502
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Classified By: Acting Political Minister-Counselor Yuri Kim for Reasons
1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Election campaigning intensified as the second week of the official campaign season drew to a close. Iraqis were bombarded by campaign ads through a variety of media; some poster-filled city streets took on a decidedly garish look. Many Iraqi political leaders, including senior GOI officials, were busy making the campaign rounds, while VP Hashimi went abroad and former PM Allawi maintained low personal visibility. The possibility of a Sunni election boycott remains unlikely, although anti-Ba'athist themes continue to have considerable resonance in the Shi'a-dominated southern provinces. Acts of violence, including bombings, murders and fighting, have occurred, but their linkage to the upcoming elections is often unclear. Numerous contacts have said that recent violence is notably less than they had expected. END SUMMARY.

A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

[1](#)2. (SBU) As the elections draw nearer, Iraqi streets are adorned with an ever-increasing amount of campaign propaganda. Automobile accidents are reportedly on the rise in the Iraqi capital due to the placement of signs and billboards at key traffic junctures. In the city of Kirkuk, news outlets reported that a campaign poster for Iraqi Kirkuk Front candidate Hala Noradin at a central traffic circle was distracting male drivers, causing accidents. The Acting Governor of Anbar province told PRToffs February 24 that while posters were present on nearly every street in Ramadi, local party leaders nevertheless complained that printers were unable to keep up with the high demand for campaign materials. Despite a police crackdown (ref A), the number of vandalized campaign posters continues to increase across Baghdad and elsewhere. The USG is contributing to the sea of visual stimuli -- the International Republican Institute (IRI) put up 1,397 billboards this week across Iraq urging Iraqis to vote. IRI's partner NGOs will distribute 5 million voting instruction leaflets in a coordinated "door stop" campaign over the February 27-28 weekend.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Television viewers cannot avoid ubiquitous campaign ads present on nearly all Arabic-language stations. State-owned Iraqi channels appear to be running ads for a variety of parties and their candidates. (Note: The Embassy will attempt to monitor government-controlled channels for signs of obvious political bias. End Note.) Sectarian themes are evident in some campaign materials, and mudslinging against rival candidates is notable. One ad features a cartoonish image of PM Maliki with photos of scenes of death,

violence, and poverty under the caption, "Five years of theft, destruction and sectarianism (Do you want another five years?" Along with the usual array of campaign propaganda, there has been a marked increase in satirical posters and cartoons appearing in some areas of Baghdad - mainly near universities - as well as on Internet sites and in newspapers. One doctored campaign photo shows a miniature ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim dressed in infant clothes sitting on the lap of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Some campaign rallies continue feature the distribution of gifts to attendees. At a rally of about 300 people in south Baghdad observed by an e-PRT, an Iraqiyya coalition candidate handed out blankets to women, jerseys to men, and toys with Qhanded out blankets to women, jerseys to men, and toys with his candidate number to children. Less common, but still existent is the distribution of cash, usually about 25,000 dinar (roughly USD 20) per person for those at rallies, but sometimes up to 250,000 dinar (about USD 200) for people like neighborhood leaders who might be able to influence votes.

POLITICAL LEADERS MAKE THE ROUNDS

¶4. (SBU) PM Maliki continued his campaign activities in the south of Iraq (ref A) to drum up support for his State of Law Alliance (SLA). He arrived in the province of Muthanna the morning of February 24 to meet with local SLA candidates and attend campaign rallies. According to media reports, Maliki is touting his record of accomplishment, telling one crowd: "We have achieved security. We've signed huge oil contracts which will give Iraq money. I am not telling you that we want to achieve something. We have already achieved something." (Note: Maliki returned to Baghdad later on the 24th to meet with visiting Swedish FM Carl Bildt. End Note.) Outside of its stronghold in the Shi'a south, SLA sponsored a large campaign rally February 22 under the slogan "By Reconciliation and Stability We Elect" at the Fallujah Business Center in Anbar province. The event, attended by a large gathering of Fallujah sheikhs and local government leaders, included a debate between SLA candidates and candidates from the rival Coalition for Iraq's Unity (CIU). The keynote address called for "national reconciliation between all Iraqi sects" as well as "focusing on restoring the former senior Iraqi Army and security officers."

¶5. (SBU) Ammar al-Hakim, ISCI head and one of the main leaders in the Iraqi National Alliance (INA) -- SLA's main competitor -- recently paid a two-day visit to the southern province of Diwaniyah, talking with key tribal leaders and conducting media interviews while accompanied by other ISCI candidates. Interior Minister Bolani, head of the secular, cross-sectarian CIU, has been campaigning in Basra and other southern areas of Iraq the past three days, making a point to meet with tribal leaders. Bolani was accused by the Sadrist Trend and other rival political groups of improperly using government vehicles and violating campaign laws while stumping for CIU candidates in Wasit province.

¶6. (C) Following the example of his Iraqiyya partner Ayad Allawi (ref A), VP Hashimi forsook domestic campaigning to meet with foreign officials and rally expatriate Iraqi voters in neighboring Arab states. (Note: Allawi continues to be criticized in local media and by rival parties for inviting foreign interference during his recent tour of regional capitals. Iraqiyya candidate Rend al-Raheem told Poloff February 25 that Allawi, whom she had spoken to that morning, was aware of his conspicuous absence from the campaign trail and would be traveling to southern provinces shortly. End Note.) Hashimi arrived in Cairo on February 23 for a three-day visit. He held talks Tuesday with PM Ahmad Nazif and met the following day with President Mubarak, FM Aboul Gheit and Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa. Hashimi plans to also visit Syria and Jordan.

The Sunni Non-Boycott

¶7. (C) MP Saleh al-Mutlaq and his Iraqi Front for National

Dialogue (IFND) party officially rescinded an earlier call for an election boycott during a February 25 press conference. Mutlaq told reporters "we decided not to give the liars a chance" and called on all Iraqis to cast election ballots. (Comment: Mutlaq reiterated to PolCouns February 23 that a boycott was not in the interest of his supporters or the Iraqi people in general, and that the IFND boycott announcement was made without his approval; see ref B. End Comment.) Even before Mutlaq recanted, most non-disqualified IFND candidates were actively campaigning. Dr. Nada Ibrahim, one of the party's candidates in Baghdad, confirmed to Poloff February 23 that she had been putting up posters and distributing campaign materials for over a week and had received hundreds of e-mails urging her not to boycott. IFND members in Diyala informed PRToffs that they had launched their campaign in the province on February 20. (Note: Ali al-Lami, executive director for the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC) told press February 24 that the AJC had referred its file on Mutlaq to the Criminal Court prosecutor "for his involvement in acts of violence and murders targeting Iraqis." While this may be only a symbolic move, the Embassy will follow-up with relevant contacts to try to determine what action, if any, the Iraqi judiciary Qtry to determine what action, if any, the Iraqi judiciary might take in response to the AJC's referral. End Note.)

De-Ba'athification Alive in the South

18. (C) Anti-Ba'athist rhetoric and action continue to play out at the provincial level in the Shi'a-dominated south of Iraq. Taking a cue from the provincial council in Karbala, which formed a provincial accountability and justice commission (ref C), and in Diwaniyah, which passed a law prohibiting former Ba'athists from holding managerial jobs in the provincial government (ref D), the Muthanna provincial council has enacted a law to purge civil servants associated with the Ba'ath Party (ref E). The head of the Muthanna Governorate Election Office (GEO) refused calls by some council members that he investigate and purge Ba'athists from the thousands of poll workers hired for election day. (Comment: Embassy and PRT continue to underscore the criticality of transparency and the rule of law. End Comment.)

Violence Less than Many Expected

19. (SBU) The campaign season continues to be punctuated by sporadic violence, although it remains difficult to determine which violent acts may be directly linked to the upcoming elections. A car bomb detonated close to the Anbar provincial government building in Anbar province on February 22, killing five people. This is the fifth attack near this facility in as many months, and comes on the heels of a deadlier explosion in the same area last week (ref A). Unknown gunmen reportedly shot and lightly wounded a female IHEC employee in the Amil district of southwest Baghdad February 24 while on her way to work at the IHEC main office. Responses to USF-I inquiries suggest, however, that the shooting may have no relation to the victim's employment with IHEC. A candidate in the small Trend for Justice and Freedom Party told Poloff February 23 that a car bomb exploded the previous evening near the home of one of his party's other candidates. No one was injured and the contact said he could not be certain of the target of the bomb. An afternoon bomb blast on February 23 in a well-known book market in downtown Baghdad -- a favorite meeting place for Iraqi intellectuals and a target of terrorists in the past -- killed one individual and wounded at least three others.

110. (SBU) Despite an evening campaign curfew in Sulaymaniyah (ref A), media reported on February 24 that violent clashes had erupted in the province between supporters of competing Kurdish electoral blocs. The fighting allegedly damaged numerous vehicles and resulted in the blocking off of streets by security forces, although no serious injuries were reported. After the recent killings of five Christians in

Ninewa province (ref F), unidentified gunmen killed three Christians, a father and his two sons (one of whom was reportedly a priest) in western Mosul on February 23. Reports from representatives of the American Islamic Congress, an USG-funded American NGO conducting a Safe Election Campaign in Basra, indicated an increase in street-level election-related disputes about vandalized posters and fighting at campaign rallies. The most gruesome act of recent violence occurred February 22 when a Shi'a couple and their six children were brutally killed in a village south of Baghdad. Some of the victims were reportedly beheaded or their throats slit. A few media outlets reported that the father of the slain children was a campaign worker who had been hanging posters for Iraqi National Congress candidate Entifadh Qanbar, a secularist and longtime associate of Ahmad Chalabi. While police conducting an investigation stated that no clear motive had emerged, Qanbar and relatives of the deceased asserted that the killings were in retaliation for campaign activities.

111. (C) Iraqi authorities have detected no discernible pattern to the recent violence; some media reports on election-related violence have been exaggerated and/or inaccurate. The Society for Defending Journalism Freedom in Iraq, an Iraqi NGO, told PRT Baghdad that it had noted an increase in media outlets skewing crime statistics for partisan purposes. An informal canvassing of candidates and political contacts at the Embassy's National Day event on February 25 revealed that most thought that violence during the election campaign had been notably less than they expected. USF-I continues to observe no sustained increase in overall violence during the past week. Awareness by the parties that they will need to form post-election partnerships with rival groups is likely helping to hold inter-party violence and dirty tactics in check. Still, the inter-party violence and dirty tactics in check. Still, the stated intent of political parties to prevent intimidation and tensions does not always match their actions. The planned signing by local party leaders in Kirkuk of a provincial campaign code of conduct, for example, failed to take place when the signers -- gathered in the governor's office -- descended into a litany of complaints against each other about posters and the presence of Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) flags.

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